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## Co-optation amid repression

The Revolutionary Communists in Saratov province, 1918-1920

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/33>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.33

ISSN: 1777-5388

### Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 November 1999

Number of pages: 625-656

ISBN: 2-7132-1341-X

ISSN: 1252-6576

### Electronic reference

Donald J. Raleigh, « Co-optation amid repression », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 40/4 | 1999, Online since 15 January 2007, Connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/33> ; DOI : 10.4000/monderusse.33

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DONALD J. RALEIGH

## CO-OPTATION *AMID* REPRESSION

### The Revolutionary Communists in Saratov province 1918-1920

*REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNISTS?* Few historians appear to know of them; not a single Western, Soviet, or Russian study focuses exclusively on the party.<sup>1</sup> Leonard Schapiro devotes a page to the Revolutionary Communists (RCs) in his classic work on the period; however, Orlando Figes's monograph on the Volga

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I wish to thank Z. E. Gusakova and her staff at the Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Saratovskoi oblasti, and the archivists at Tsentri dokumentatsii noveishei istorii Saratovskoi oblasti. I am grateful to N. I. Deviatkina and Jonathan Wallace for their comments on an earlier version of this work. I also would like to acknowledge the financial support of the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and the University of North Carolina Research Council, which helped make my research possible.

1. The fullest discussions of the party I have found are in the works of Iu. I. Shestak, *Bol'sheviki i levye techeniia melkoburzhuaiznoi demokratii* (Moscow, 1974); id., *Taktika bol'shevikov po otnosheniiu k partii levых eserov i otkolovshimsia ot nee partiiam revoliutsionnykh kommunistov i narodnikov-kommunistov* (Moscow, 1971); id., "Vzaimootnosheniia bol'shevikov s levymi melkoburzhuaiznymi partiiami i gruppami v gody grazhdanskoi voyny," in I. I. Mints, ed., *Bankrotstvo melkoburzhuaiznykh partii Rossii 1917-1922 gg.* (Moscow, 1977): 126-136; and id., "Bankrotstvo partii 'Revoliutsionnykh kommunistov' v Povolzh'e," *Povolzhskii krai*, 4 (1975): 24-38. A chapter in M. V. Spirina's *Krakh melkoburzhuaiznoi kontseptsii sotsializma eserov* (Moscow, 1987), discusses the party's "evolution" toward Bolshevism, but is based on a limited source base and, like the studies by Shestak, says little about the specific historical and geographical contexts in which the party emerged in Saratov. Only the briefest mention of the party can be found in standard Soviet works such as K. V. Gusev's *Krakh partii levых eserov* (Moscow, 1963). Before 1994, the one attempt to assess the party's role in Saratov province during the Civil War was a short, tendentious essay by M. Sagrad'ian, "Iz istorii vozniknoveniia odnopartiinoi sistemy v Sovetskoi respublike," in *Istoriia partiinykh organizatsii Povolzh'ia (Mezhvuzovskii nauchnyi sbornik)* (Saratov, 1973), vyp. 1: 108-123. The crudest Soviet representation of the party is found in *Ocherki istorii Saratovskoi partiinoi organizatsii KPSS*, Pt. 2, 1918-1937 (Saratov, 1965): 107. A post-Soviet attempt to illuminate the party's role is found in Iu. P. Suslov's *Sotsialisticheskie partii i krest'ianstvo Povolzh'ia (oktiabr' 1917-1920)* (Saratov, 1994).

countryside and Vladimir Brovkin's *Behind the front lines of the Civil War* do not mention them at all.<sup>2</sup> The few Soviet historians who acknowledged the existence of the Revolutionary Communists dismissed them as a group of former Left SRs who broke with the party in July 1918 after the murder of the German ambassador, Count Mirbach, in order to form a separate party that September, which eventually collapsed under the weight of its own "ideological contradictions." While such an interpretation is not devoid of merit, it offers but a crude representation of a fascinating and important political phenomenon. From late 1918 until October 1920 the Revolutionary Communists participated in the ruling coalition in Saratov province, attracting a considerable following in several key districts and *uezd* towns, as well as elsewhere in the Urals and Volga regions. Perhaps the most important supplier of grain to the urban centers of the Communist-controlled heartland, front-line Saratov province remained Red throughout the Civil War, owing to the hybrid form of left-socialist radicalism that had emerged there, of which Revolutionary Communism constituted an integral part. Drawing on recently opened archives, I seek to restore this influential but unknown party to the historical record, to clarify the Revolutionary Communist Party's contribution to the survival of Soviet power, its relationship to Bolshevism, and the reasons for the party's ultimate decline in 1920.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Leonard Schapiro, *The origin of the Communist autocracy: Political opposition in the Soviet state. First phase, 1917-1922*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1977): 180-181; Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia Civil War: The Volga countryside in revolution, 1917-1921* (Oxford, 1989); Vladimir N. Brovkin, *Behind the front lines of the Civil War: Political parties and social movements in Russia, 1918-1922* (Princeton, 1994). In fact, none of the recent studies on the Civil War mentions the Revolutionary Communists. The party enjoyed popularity in Moscow, but Richard Sakwa does not discuss them in his *Soviet Communists in power: A study of Moscow during the Civil War, 1918-1921* (Hampshire, 1988), nor does Ettore Cinnella in "The tragedy of the Russian Revolution: Promise and default of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in 1918," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 38, 1-2 (1997): 45-82.

3. Before the stunning changes in the former Soviet Union revolutionized scholars' access to sources earlier off-limits, Western historians had already begun to reassess—and in some cases examine in depth for the first time—the role of the Bolsheviks' socialist opponents (and allies) both before and after the great divide of 1917. For the Socialist Revolutionaries, I have in mind the writings of Michael Melancon, especially his *The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Russian anti-war movement, 1914-1917* (Columbus, 1990); id., "Athens or Babylon?: The birth and development of the Revolutionary Parties in Saratov, 1890-1905," in R. Wade and S. Seregny, eds., *Politics and society in provincial Russia: Saratov, 1590-1917* (Columbus, 1989): 73-112; id., "Marching together! Left bloc activities in the Russian Revolutionary Movement, 1900 to February 1917," *Slavic Review*, 49, 2 (Summer 1990): 239-252; id., "The Socialist Revolutionaries from 1902 to 1907: Peasant and workers' Party," *Russian History*, 12, 1 (1985): 2-47; id., "'Stormy petrels': The Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia's legal labor organizations, 1905-1914," *The Carl Beck Papers*, 703 (June 1988); id., "Who wrote what and when? The proclamations of the February Revolution," *Soviet Studies*, 40, 3 (1988): 479-500; M. Hildermeier, *Die Sozialrevolutionäre Partei Russlands: Agrarsozialismus und Modernisierung im Zarenreich* (Cologne and Vienna, 1978); Christopher Rice, *Russian workers and the Socialist-Revolutionary Party through the Revolution of 1905-1907* (New York, 1988). Vladimir Brovkin has done the most to question the literature on Russia's Mensheviks. See his *The Mensheviks after October: Socialist opposition and the rise of the Bolshevik dictatorship* (Ithaca and London, 1987); id., ed. and tr., *Dear comrades: Menshevik reports on the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War* (Stanford, 1991); id., "The Mensheviks under attack: The transformation of Soviet politics, June-September 1918," *Jahrbücher für*

Contemporary social theory suggests ways in which societies control their subjects not only by imposing constraints, but also by co-opting their subjects' strategies of dissent, thus predetermining how they rebel against these constraints.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, because the Bolsheviks relied heavily on what Michael Mann calls the "despotic" power of the state<sup>5</sup> in order to effect the changes they believed they had the moral right to introduce into Russia, they readily resorted to repression and likewise sought to manipulate the dominant discourse in which politics were played out. In either case they often selectively drew on their opponents' policies. The resulting dynamic of co-optation amid repression became a characteristic Bolshevik practice during the period and a key element of the formative experience of Civil War for all involved. Thus, this case study of the party's relationship toward its populist ally offers valuable insights into how the Bolsheviks exercised state power in general.

### The Saratov Left SRs

The Revolutionary Communists emerged from the radical wing of the SR Party, the Left SRs.<sup>6</sup> In considering the role of the latter in Saratov, we see that a left socialist bloc had formed locally before 1917. During the revolution, it took on new significance as social polarization undermined hopes for a peaceful solution to Russia's political impasse. The October 1917 events led to a formal split in the Socialist Revolutionary Party as its left wing joined the Lenin government. In Saratov province the Bolshevik-Left SR bloc contributed singularly to the spread and consolidation of Soviet power in 1918, especially at the district level, where a radical populist tradition had been in the making since the turn of the century.<sup>7</sup>

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*Geschichte Osteuropas*, 32 (1984): 378-391; and id., "Workers' unrest and the Bolshevik's (sic) response in 1919," *Slavic Review*, 49, 3 (1990): 350-373.

But apart from Iu. G. Fel'shtinskii's, Lutz Hafner's, and Ettore Cinnella's published studies and work in progress by Michael Melancon and Sally Boniece on the Left SRs during the Civil War, there has been no attempt since Oliver Radkey's 1963 volume on the early months of Soviet rule to look closely at the Socialist Revolutionaries after the October Revolution. See Iu. G. Fel'shtinskii, *Bol'sheviki i levye esery, oktiabr' 1917-iul' 1918: Na puti k odnopartiinoi diktature* (Paris, 1985); L. Hafner, *Die Partie der Linken Sozialrevolutionäre in der Russischen Revolution von 1917/18* (Koln, 1994), and O. Radkey, *The sickle under the hammer: The Russian Socialist Revolutionaries in the early months of Soviet rule* (New York, 1963).

4. Gerald Graff, "Co-optation," in H. Aram Veeser, ed., *The new historicism* (New York, 1989): 168-169. This idea owes a good deal to the work of Michel Foucault, who investigated how power tends to organize and channel dissent, rather than repress it. See his *The history of sexuality*, vol. I, *An introduction*, trans. Richard Hurley (New York, 1978): 17-49.

5. That is, "the range of actions which the elite is experienced to undertake without routine, institutionalized negotiations with civil society groups." See Michael Mann, "The Autonomous power of the state: Its origins, mechanisms and results," in *States in history* (Oxford, 1986): 112.

6. Michael Melancon argues that the Left SRs were not a radical offshoot of the SR Party, but the main current within it. See "Left SR proclamations, 1914-1919: Speaking Left SR," presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS), Seattle, Nov. 21, 1992.

7. See chapter 8 of my *Revolution on the Volga: 1917 in Saratov* (Ithaca, 1986): 292-320.

The Left SR Party program—published, incidentally, by the Saratov Soviet—made them a valuable, even essential ally of the Bolsheviks. Viewing themselves as “one of the divisions in the army of international socialism,” the Left SRs considered the industrial proletariat, the toiling peasant majority, and the revolutionary-socialist intelligentsia the three component parts of the exploited population whose task was to emancipate itself through social revolution. The party advocated establishment of a dictatorship of all toiling people, the extension of voting rights only to toilers (*tsenz truda*), repression of the exploiting classes, and a free federation of Soviet republics. Like Lenin, the Left SR leaders believed the Constituent Assembly should not be allowed to supplant Soviet power, whose survival rested with the fate of the Bolsheviks. Convinced they were in the best position to influence Bolshevik policies in regard to Russia’s peasant majority, they accepted portfolios in the Lenin government while in the provinces they supported the transfer of executive power to local soviets.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, the Left SRs’ faith in the subjective forces of history, such as personality and individualism, and their belief that ethical considerations were as important as economic factors distanced them from the Marxists. While these orientations affected its policies and practices, the Saratov Left SR organization remained committed to class war, to revolution, and to Soviet power, especially as it faced growing opposition from both moderate socialists and the Whites.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the potent alliance in Saratov even weathered the controversy over the Brest-Litovsk peace that poisoned relations between the two parties’ central committees early in 1918, after which the Left SRs withdrew from the *Sovnarkom* in protest. The Left SRs, like the Bolsheviks, were similarly divided over Lenin’s foreign policy, and in Saratov both party organizations initially railed against the peace treaty.<sup>10</sup>

The common ground both local party organizations found regarding the disputed treaty strengthened the left-socialist bloc in Saratov, as Left SR activists, arriving from Poltava and Kharkov, carried out party work at the district and *volost’* level. Moreover, the Left SRs’ backing of the Bolsheviks during elections to the Saratov Soviet in April 1918 kept the elections from being a rout for Lenin’s party, for this support came just as the Bolsheviks’ relations with Right SRs and

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8. Partiia levyykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov (internatsionalistov), *Programma i ustav partii levyykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov (internatsionalistov)* (Saratov, 1918): 5-9. See also the statement by Ustinov regarding the class basis of the party found in *Znamia revoliutsii*, 4, 96 (Nov. 29, 1918): 3.

9. Partiia levyykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov (internatsionalistov), *Materialy po peresmotru partiinoi programmy*, vol. 3, *Sbornik statei po peresmotru programmy* (Moscow, 1918).

10. See chapter 3 of my forthcoming study, *Experiencing Civil War: Politics, society, and revolutionary culture on the Volga. Saratov, 1918-1922*. For a discussion of the emergence of the Left SRs in Saratov see the remarks of Ezhov at the First Party Congress. *Protokoly pervogo s"ezda partii levyykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov (internatsionalistov)* (Moscow, 1918): 9. Articles published in the newspaper *Znamia truda* and later as a separate anthology observe that the party’s maximum program complemented that of the Bolsheviks. For rifts within the Left SR leadership see E. Cinnella, *art. cit.*: 62-63.

Mensheviks deteriorated further. Taking advantage of economic dislocation and food shortages to galvanize opposition to the new order, these groups decried the Bolsheviks' shutting down of the opposition press and Constituent Assembly.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, conflict flaring up within the Left SR Party leadership over tactics, often exacerbated by personal rivalries, presaged the breakup of the party in the summer of 1918. These developments found resonance along the Volga after another influx of "outsiders" appeared in town. Comprised mainly of workers, the Saratov Left SR organization had lacked leaders of national stature until May, when, in the wake of the party's second congress, M. G. Markariants, V. Chernyi, A. M. Ustinov, P. F. Sapozhnikov, and others traveled to Saratov to set up a Volga regional party center for the expressed purpose of uniting those who opposed the Central Committee's "destructive" tactics aimed at undermining the Brest-Litovsk peace. (At this time Ustinov was already proposing that the Left SRs rename themselves Communist-Socialists in order to link themselves more closely with the Bolsheviks and separate themselves from the parent SR Party.) Saratov offered a favorable atmosphere, for the local Left SR organization, like those in Kazan', Penza, Ufa, and elsewhere in the region, had come to protest the "revolutionary fantasy and political emotionalism" of the party's Central Committee.<sup>12</sup> In their own estimation, Saratov Left SRs believed the relationship with the Leninists remained "excellent." During an anti-Bolshevik uprising that broke out in Saratov in mid-May 1918<sup>13</sup>, an armed guard of Left SRs from Kharkhov rose to the soviet's defense; more than half of the delegates to a provincial peasant congress in May were Left SRs, and luminaries such as Ustinov and Sapozhnikov sat on the congress' presidium.<sup>14</sup>

Other threats to Soviet power followed hard on the heels of the May uprising, as a result of which the Saratov Soviet expelled its socialist opposition (but not the Left SRs) *before* the Central Executive Committee took similar steps. The success of local Left SRs in the Saratov countryside, however, appears to have caused growing concern within the Bolshevik organization which, at the end of June, resolved to break off joint agitation work with the populists. This took place on the eve of the introduction of the Bolsheviks' brutal grain requisition policies and related measures, which the Left SRs protested. Relations between the parties at the local level were thus beginning to show the first signs of strain when news of the assassination of Count Mirbach in the capital in conjunction with the start of the Fifth Congress of Soviets, generally cited as the opening salvo in the so-called Left SR uprising, reached Saratov in early July 1918.

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11. *Znamia revoliutsii* reported that the Left SRs received as many votes as the Right SRs. See *Znamia revoliutsii*, 3, 95 (Nov. 7, 1918): 4.

12. *Partiia levyykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov (internatsionalistov), Vokrug moskovskikh iul'skikh sobytii: Sbornik statei* (Saratov, 1918).

13. See my "Languages of power: How the Saratov Bolsheviks imagined their enemies," *Slavic Review*, 57, 2 (1998): 320-349.

14. *Znamia revoliutsii*, 3, 95 (Nov. 7, 1918): 4.

## Reactions to the Left SR “uprising”

A growing lack of harmony between the Bolsheviks and Left SR leadership determined the tone of the Fifth Congress of Soviets that convened on July 4, which included 678 Communist and 269 Left SR delegates. Prominent Left SRs Mariia Spiridonova and B. D. Kamkov obstreperously challenged key Bolshevik strategies regarding the Brest-Litovsk peace, the introduction of the committees of the village poor (*kombedy*) in the countryside, and granting courts the right to mete out the death penalty.

What unfolded next is yet to be explained definitively in the historical literature. Left SRs Ia. G. Bliumkin and N. A. Andreev assassinated the German ambassador, Count Mirbach, on July 6 in the hope of undermining the Brest-Litovsk peace. Left SRs who for a short time controlled the Cheka headquarters in the capital sent cables to the provinces explaining the party's motivation for the assassination and criticizing the treaty with Germany. The Bolsheviks interpreted the murder and related events as a conspiracy against Soviet power—which it was in one sense—and took advantage of the situation to decapitate the Left SR Party. Although the documentation can be decoded in various ways, the Bolshevik response should come as no surprise, given the party's fixation with conspiracy and the anti-Bolshevik uprising, probably unrelated, which broke out in Yaroslavl the same day.<sup>15</sup>

Study of the reaction in Saratov to the Mirbach murder does not shed much light on the historiographical controversy surrounding the event, but it does demonstrate serious factionalism within the Left SR Party leadership and considerable hostility toward its Central Committee. It also challenges Brovkin's conclusion that “all over Russia the Left SRs [...] were arrested and expelled from the local Soviets.”<sup>16</sup> At an emergency meeting about forty Left SRs protested against their party's Central Committee in Moscow, while local Bolshevik leaders expressed their belief that the Saratov Left SRs would remain loyal to Soviet power. After heated debate, the Saratov Left SR organization carried a resolution distancing itself from the tactics of the party's Central Committee and calling for a national party council (*sovet*) to be held in Saratov on July 21.

A resolution passed on July 9 at a citywide Left SR Party conference states unambiguously that whatever the intentions of their Moscow comrades, the

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15. Most historians accept the notion of an uprising, while a few historians (namely G. Katkov, Iu. Fel'shtinskii, and Vladimir Brovkin) argue that the Bolsheviks had actually conspired against the Left SRs. Calling for a reassessment, Lutz Hafner convincingly shows there is no hard evidence to back the Bolshevik conspiracy charge. On the other hand, he maintains that the “Bolsheviks consciously and quite successfully aimed to split and thereby destroy the Left SR Party.” See his “The assassination of Count Mirbach and the ‘July uprising’ of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow, 1918,” *Russian Review*, 50, 3 (1991): 324-344 (quote found on 340). Michael Melancon also argues that the Left SRs did not plan a coup, but merely wanted to end the peace with Germany. See his “The Left SRs, July 1918-1919: Dissolution and survival,” unpublished paper presented at the 25th national meeting of the AAASS, November 1993.

16. V. N. Brovkin, *Behind the front lines....*, *op. cit.*: 20.

“uprising” against the ruling party had turned into one against Soviet power.<sup>17</sup> The resolution proclaims that the local organization would have judged its Central Committee “even more harshly” if it had not been for the deep certainty “that their stupid heroism had its source in an incorrect assessment of real facts and was the most egregious tactical mistake of a group of the most selfless revolutionaries.” Arguing that the Central Committee’s tactics since March “logically had to end with an uprising against the very government,” it called for deepening the class struggle and forging a united front with the Bolsheviks. Saratov Left SRs reiterated their call for an all-Russian conference and their desire to take part in Soviet institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Articles written by Rudakov, Chernyi, Sapozhnikov, and Ustinov in preparation of the “Saratov conference” backed the working out of a new political tactic based on the principle of class struggle, seeking to save the party which “did not die and cannot die.” The authors rejected individual acts of terror, emphatically denying that the entire party bore responsibility for the actions of its Central Committee, “which is far removed from local party organizations.” Denouncing the party Central Committee, Sapozhnikov underscored the rift between it and the locales. The essays assert that the heroic-romantic period in the history of revolutionary socialism had given way to a practical need to govern. They accent the primacy of the class struggle in a united front with the Bolsheviks against the enemies of Soviet power for the triumph of the social revolution.<sup>19</sup>

Another collection of essays put out by Saratov Left SRs in connection with the conference repeats the same harsh judgments of the Central Committee, but also some cautious language suggesting that not all the facts surrounding the July events were known. Lamenting the loss of their “friendly critics on the left,” whom they had “betrayed at the most difficult and dangerous moment of the class struggle,” the authors admitted the party “was crawling on all fours.” The self-congratulatory (and self-promoting) document notes that the Saratov organization, the first to sound the alarm [against the Central Committee], promoted the slogan “the class struggle by way of a united front with the Bolsheviks against all enemies [...] of Soviet Russia in the name of the triumph of the social revolution.”<sup>20</sup> Yet while condemning Mirbach’s murder as a counterrevolutionary act, Rudakov stressed that without complete information it was impossible to say what drove the party’s

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17. Saratov Left SRs did not know whether the Left SRs had decided at their Third Party Congress to rise up against Soviet power or whether the uprising was a response to the Fifth Congress of Soviets’ decision to fire on Left SRs who had revolted against Soviet power at the front. For the Saratov Soviet’s discussion of the matter see V. P. Antonov-Saratovskii, ed., *Saratovskii Sovet rabochikh deputatov, 1917-1918: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1931): 575-583.

18. *Partiia levykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov (internatsionalistov), Materialy k Vserossiiskoi konferentsii Partii levykh s.r. (internatsionalistov) v g. Saratove (Iiul’, 1918 g.)* (Saratov, 1918): 3-6.

19. *Ibid.*: 7-21.

20. *Partiia levykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov, Vokrug moskovskikh iul’skikh sobytii, op. cit.*: 3.



Central Committee to rise up against the ruling party.<sup>21</sup> Emphasizing the need to resolve the crisis peacefully, he stated that local Left SRs must morally support their Central Committee, even if it had made a mistake. Insofar as the majority of local committees *opposed* the Central Committee, the Bolsheviks were forcing an artificial split.<sup>22</sup> Ustinov suggested that those who criticized the party for “wagging like the Bolsheviks’ tail” may actually have prompted leaders to show the party’s “real face,” which *did* separate it from the Bolsheviks *and* the Right SRs. More important—and this point has bearing on later developments—he reminded his comrades that the Bolsheviks *had* fallen under Left SR influence in “recognizing the possibility of constructing socialism in a backward country [...] the socialization of land, and the vanguard role of a minority that took the initiative, etc.”<sup>23</sup> Ustinov also dismissed the notion that Russia could launch an uprising against the world bourgeoisie, not only because of the psychological weariness of the masses, but also because events in Russia had little impact outside the country. “It must be understood, finally, that the *salvation* of our revolution is not in an *uprising*, not in a *breathing spell*, but in the *international social revolution*.”<sup>24</sup>

Denying that their actions represented a schismatic act or one of insubordination, twenty delegates representing thirteen Left SR organizations assembled in Saratov on July 21, 1918, where the majority condemned Mirbach’s murder and reiterated the need to convene a national congress to set up a new party.<sup>25</sup> The defenders of the party’s Central Committee at the Saratov conference largely represented provincial organizations, whereas delegates from *uezd* centers in the same provinces “voted for a radical change in the tactics of the party and in its attitude toward Soviet practical work.”<sup>26</sup>

The events surrounding the murder of Count Mirbach sundered the Left SR Party as the Bolsheviks expressed their desire to continue working only with those Left SRs who condemned their Central Committee’s policies. As the view took hold that the Left SRs had risen up unsuccessfully against Soviet power, an “enormous” number of Left SRs joined the Bolsheviks, suggesting the importance of the Bolsheviks’ ability to control the dominant political discourse. While some radical populists continued calling themselves Left SRs, two new parties emerged as well, the Revolutionary Communists (*Revoliutsionnye kommunisty*), who participated in the ruling coalition until October 1920, and the Popular Communists (*Narodniki-Kommunisty*), who had already merged with the Communist Party by

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21. *Ibid.*: 5-6.

22. *Ibid.*: 34-38.

23. *Ibid.*: 8-9.

24. *Ibid.*: 30-33; *Znamia revoliutsii*, 3, 95 (Nov. 7, 1918): 4.

25. A development greeted warmly, incidentally, by V. I. Lenin. See *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (hereafter *PSS*) (Moscow, 1963), vol. 37: 35-36, and M. Sagrad’ian, *art. cit.*: 109. Shestak claims that eighteen organizations sent representatives to Saratov. See Iu. I. Shestak, *Bol’sheviki i levye techeniia...*, *op. cit.*: 33.

26. *Partiia levyykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov, Vokrug moskovskikh iul’skikh sobytii*, *op. cit.*: 43.

November 1918.<sup>27</sup> Saratov's Ustinov and A. L. Kolegaev emerged as the most forceful spokesmen of the Revolutionary Communists, although the latter soon joined the Communist Party. While the two men did not see eye to eye on all tactical matters, they had nothing good to say about the Left SR Central Committee. This is particularly true of Ustinov, who emphasized that the Left SRs' withdrawal from the Fifth Congress represented a "traitorous provocation of agents of the bourgeoisie," which demonstrated that the Left SRs "were henceforth enemies of the majority of representatives of the workers and peasants." He denounced Central Committee members as a "group of madmen-*intelligenti*, thirsting for success among the petite-bourgeoisie, middle-class urban dwellers, and village kulaks [who] rose up against the dictatorship of workers and the poorest peasants and won for themselves the most enthusiastic sympathy from all those who support the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."<sup>28</sup>

Breaking tactically with the Left SRs, former party members founded the Revolutionary Communist Party in Moscow on September 25-27, 1918. Their organ, *Volia truda*, disavowed the use of force to undermine the Brest peace; acts of terrorism by Soviet parties; open struggle with the ruling Communist Party in order to seize power by force; and any policies that weakened, in the masses' view, the class character of the revolution, "which, through civil war will lead to socialism." The Central Committee selected at the congress included a number of "Saratovites," including Ustinov and Chernyi.<sup>29</sup>

If initially leaders of the new party felt compelled to renounce any links between it and the former Left SRs,<sup>30</sup> they soon seemed comfortable admitting this heritage. By mid-October Saratov RCs began "clarifying" their revolutionary past. As they saw things, the deepening rift between the class of toilers and the bourgeoisie had driven all those not committed to the class struggle into the counterrevolutionary

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27. Formed in September 1918, the Popular Communists rejected Left SR tactics while adhering to populist tradition. They, too, accepted Soviet power, but unlike the Revolutionary Communists, they saw the committees of the village poor as organs of the revolutionary class war in the countryside. The party's main leaders, G. D. Zaks, Oborin, and others, declared that all Soviet parties have one program—the building of Communism—and one tactic—class struggle. See K. V. Gusev, *Krakh partii levykh eserov*, op. cit.: 226, 256.

28. G. Ustinov, *Krushenie partii levykh "es-erov"* (Moscow, 1918): 6-7, 11-12, 16-18, 21-22. Ustinov initially took a stance similar to that of the Popular Communists in regard to the *kombedy*. But this attitude was not shared by other party members, who condemned the committees.

29. K. V. Gusev, *Krakh partii levykh eserov*, op. cit.: 226; resolutions from the congress are found in *Znaniia revoliutsii*, 1, 93 (Oct. 21, 1918): 3-4; Iu. I. Shestak, "RKP(b) i partiia 'revoliutsionnogo kommunizma'," *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, 2 (1972): 20; and Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei istorii (hereafter RTsKhIDNI), f. 282, op. 2, d. 3, ll. 2-5 ob. The Central Committee also included A. Ustinov, V. Chernyi, G. Maksimov, A. Kolegaev, A. Bitsenko, A. Aleksandrov, and M. Dobrokhotov.

30. Recoiling when RCs in Vol'sk referred to themselves as former Left SRs, the Saratov RC committee emphasized that the Revolutionary Communists had changed their tactics and fleshed out its program to such an extent "that all ties with the Left SR Party are completely severed." Tsentr dokumentatsii noveishei istorii Saratovskoi oblasti (hereafter TsDNISO), f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 18, l. 6.

camp.<sup>31</sup> This division had fractured the Left SR Party, whose revolutionary wing that recognized the legacy of Chernyshevskii, Lavrov, and Mikhailovskii had become the Revolutionary Communists. Apart from them, only the Bolsheviks understood the class nature of the social revolution that had engulfed Russia. The RCs emphasized, however, that it was not through the dictatorship of the proletariat but through the dictatorship of *all* toiling elements that socialism would be built in Russia.<sup>32</sup>

### **With the power of the toilers to socialism!**

The first issues of the Saratov Revolutionary Communists' newspaper, *Znamia revoliutsii*, had some explaining to do. "We are *Communists*, that is, we are moving toward socialism, through concrete forms of the communization of the economy. And we are *revolutionaries* [...] in a programmatic-tactical sense, insofar as we have promoted and promote [...] the creative role of personality, the role of the revolutionary minority [that shows] initiative in history." More to the point: "not through the dictatorship of the proletariat, but through the dictatorship of all toiling elements, united in a single class of labor" will socialism be brought to Russia.<sup>33</sup> With the power of the toilers to socialism! (*Vlast'iu trudiashchikhsia — k sotsializmu*).

Those familiar with Russian populism will recognize its legacy in the RCs' emphasis on the individual (rather than the collective), on developing all facets of a person (rather than accenting economic considerations), on local initiative (rather than centralization), on the revolutionary potential of the toiling masses (rather than of the industrial proletariat). But the specifics were often murky. Although party leaders disagreed over how to effect economic transformation in the countryside, they advocated the socialization, not nationalization, of land, which must belong to those who work it, and under no circumstances to the state.<sup>34</sup> Seeking to establish a mass party, the RCs appealed to morally righteous people to join them. Sensitive to the party's own crystallization from the Left SRs—which involved vocal opposition to the Central Committee—the RCs called for strict party discipline and compliance with all directives issued by congresses and party committees.<sup>35</sup>

The Revolutionary Communists' tactics can best be summed up as the application of radical populist principles and doctrine to ever changing civil war conditions without undermining the alliance with the Communist Party. Dividing

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31. See, for instance, the no. 89, Sept. 20, 1918, issue of *Znamia revoliutsii*. Interestingly, the Revolutionary Communists later put out a paper with the same name.

32. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 15, ll. 8-11.

33. *Znamia revoliutsii*, 1, 93 (Oct. 21, 1918): 1.

34. M. V. Spirina, *Krakh melkoburzhuznoi kontseptsii....*, op. cit.: 174-176, 184; RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 3, ll. 57-57 ob.

35. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 14, l. 1.

society into two groups, the toilers and those who exploited them, the RCs' version of the heroic present maintained that foreign and domestic considerations determined their policies. The former included the breakup of the world economy owing to the imperialist war, the growing onslaught of world imperialism against Soviet Russia and the worldwide workers'-peasants' movement, and the developing social revolution that would rupture imperialism from within. The most important domestic considerations determining Revolutionary Communist policies were economic collapse resulting from the war and the old order, the outbreak of civil war ("the inevitable companion of social revolution, which in turn is deepening economic ruin"), and the constellation of social forces in the country. In this "transition" period Revolutionary Communist theorists saw the role of parties as chiefly ideological: to harness the creative power of the toiling masses and to *broaden* the "dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>36</sup> Party literature emphasized the fact that social revolution had broken out in *peasant* Russia, and that the Bolsheviks wrongly sought to build a new socialist economy without taking the peasant majority into consideration.<sup>37</sup> Walking a fine line between criticizing specific Bolshevik policies and supporting Soviet power, the RCs felt compelled to reiterate their commitment to Soviet power and to a united front with the Bolsheviks. Reconfirming that they would "never permit any sort of uprising against the existing power of the soviets" and that they were ready to combat those who tried, Saratov RCs denounced the Left SRs and stressed the need for a united front with the Bolsheviks. "Down with all imperialist robbers and brigands! Death to all parasites and usurpers of the toiling masses! Long live the united revolutionary front!"<sup>38</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight it appears that the Revolutionary Communists' understanding of the social dynamics of the revolution involved them in a discursive struggle with the Communists in which the populists were on the defensive from the very start. The events of October 1917 had underscored the central role of the proletariat and even of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But the RCs held that the narrow dictatorship had significance *only* during the period of the seizure of power and destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus, and that a dictatorship of *all* toiling elements was essential for building a new order. Confident of their ability to compete with the Bolsheviks on these grounds (recall Ustinov's conviction that the Bolsheviks' belief that socialism could be constructed in peasant Russia had a populist origin) the Revolutionary Communists held that they could convince the Bolsheviks to change their tactics, or alter their policies. The preponderance of Russia's peasant population gave the RCs their self-assurance.

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36. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 3, 4 ob.

37. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 1, l. 13.

38. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 8, l. 11. At the same time the party chided those who "not seeing any farther than their noses" blamed the Bolsheviks for food supply shortages. See, for example, *Znamia revoliutsii*, 2, 94 (Oct. 28 (Nov. 1), 1918): 2-3.

Indeed, Saratov Bolsheviks moved gingerly in introducing committees of the village poor, which a Volga-Urals regional RC Party conference at the end of 1918 condemned. Lamenting that the “dictatorship of the proletariat is becoming a dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party,” the RCs claimed that the Bolsheviks’ clumsy efforts at socializing the economy was creating a form of “state socialism” that excluded elements of the toiling population, that is, most peasants. Delegates called for uniting all revolution-minded elements of the population to bring about change *in union* with the Bolsheviks, thus preventing “broad segments of the toiling masses from rising up against the Bolsheviks and thereby against Soviet power.” Although this stance exacerbated relations between the two parties at the local level, the Communist Party’s subsequent decision to disband the *kombedy* convinced the RCs that they and other “revolution-minded elements of the population” could get the Bolsheviks to alter their policies and co-opt those of the populists.

The Revolutionary Communists’ commitment to Soviet power prompted them to perceive otherwise questionable Bolshevik practices as the consequences of temporary circumstances brought about by civil war. For example, they recognized the need for the centralization of Russian political life in this transition period characterized by a life-and-death struggle with the Whites. Moreover, at their Third Congress in April 1919, the RCs rejected cooperation with the Mensheviks and SRs, affirming that the Bolsheviks represented the “major fighting force of the social revolution.”<sup>39</sup> When Saratov fell under siege in early July, the chair of the provincial RC committee, Sapozhnikov, instructed all party members to join forces with the Bolsheviks, to refrain from carrying out any independent policies, particularly in regard to the Communists’ detested grain policies, in order to create a united front to defend Soviet power. “In case of disagreements with Bolsheviks at the local level,” he instructed RCs to “investigate the matter and disband the [party] organizations. Issue appropriate appeals in view of the threatening danger. Mobilize all local organizations.”<sup>40</sup>

This is not to say that the Revolutionary Communists lost sight of their goals or their constituency. Resolutions carried by the “First Conference (sovet) of the Revolutionary Communist Party” held in Saratov that difficult summer underscore the “significant withdrawal of the laboring masses from politics and from the soviets” brought about by the Communists’ attempts to introduce a party dictatorship in conditions of overall economic ruin and class war. Although the RCs welcomed the new political course adopted by the Communists after their Eighth Congress in March 1919 (regarding the middle peasant, whom the party now embraced, and the

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39. Iu. I. Shestak, *Bol'sheviki i levye techeniia...*, op. cit.: 23-24.

40. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 49, l. 25. Sapozhnikov's telegram is found in *Ibid.*, d. 98, l. 3; similar telegrams earmarked for specific *uezd* committees are found in f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 56, ll. 12-17, and in op. 1, d. 52, ll. 7-8. Interestingly enough, the Vol'sk Bolshevik committee agreed to compromise with the RCs, but “under no circumstances” to accept minority representative status. See TsDNISO, f. 27, op. 1, d. 236, l. 12. At roughly the same time, the Third Party Congress of the RC Party called upon all organizations to send responsible members to the Eastern front. However, the party took advantage of the situation to criticize changes that had come to the Red Army. See TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 46, ll. 4, 5.

introduction of the Soviet Constitution), the RCs believed the changes could not attract the laboring peasantry, “who until now remained almost without political leadership, which the Revolutionary Communist Party must provide.” The anti-Bolshevik mood that had spontaneously flared up in Russia threatened the revolution and deepened the apolitical feelings of significant strata of laborers susceptible to the forces of counterrevolution, spreading hopes that to topple Soviet power would put an end to war and hunger. Reaffirming their commitment to class struggle and to a united revolutionary front with the ruling party, the RCs believed they must organize the peasantry and strengthen the authority of the soviets of toiling workers and peasants in order to create a stable revolutionary-socialist majority. The Saratov RC organization likewise went on record that “the struggle between the two approaches to socialist construction (Marxism and populism) must not permit battles between the two political parties.” But the Revolutionary Communists fully intended to propagate their ideas and strengthen their influence over the masses, inviting all populist groups and parties that shared its program and tactics to join them in building a new order, thereby leaving the door open to merger.<sup>41</sup> And it was this above all else that made the Bolsheviks leery of their allies.

The Revolutionary Communists maintained their backing of Soviet power, however, appealing to the toiling masses to work together to smash world capitalism. A resolution on tactics passed in September 1919 noted that the disagreement between the two methods of socialist construction could only be resolved by the *organic* evolution of new socioeconomic forms. It reiterated the refrain that “only revolutionary populism” represented *all* the toiling masses. It opposed the Communist Party’s centralization of the socialization process, juxtaposing it to the RCs’ concern with satisfying one’s “striving for [developing] personality and total emancipation.” But the RCs endorsed the principle of lasting support for the Bolsheviks: “we support them despite their methods of constructing [socialism], we support them, for the main task of the moment is the battle against capitalism.” In spite of the peasantry’s “natural desire” to undermine the Bolsheviks’ rural program, the RCs must turn their attention to the “more urgent” need to overthrow capitalism. Party regulations approved at this time declared that the proletariat and toiling peasantry were equal players in the revolutionary drama. The party called upon all members to take part in Soviet work and to strengthen the Red Army, all the while maintaining friendly relations with the Bolsheviks.<sup>42</sup>

Until the very end of their independent existence the Revolutionary Communists continued to question the viability of specific Bolshevik strategies. However, as in the past, the RCs did not waver in their commitment to Soviet power or in their willingness to subordinate their party to the Bolsheviks when they felt the revolution was at stake. For example, in 1920 the Revolutionary Communists spoke out against the efficacy of a policy known as labor conscription. Yet Saratov’s Sapozhnikov, in a sincere if desperate attempt to make sense of it,

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41. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 1-2 ob.

42. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 42, ll. 7-8, 10-11, 19, 22-24; op. 1, d. 44, ll. 12, 17.

eventually saw the temporary necessity of labor armies, labor conscription, and coercion.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in early 1920 the RCs promoted the organization of a production union of workers of the land (*proizvodstvennyi soiuz rabotnikov zemli*) in order “to bring about socialism by means of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” The guidelines called for uniting “all workers regardless of their political or religious convictions.” While the details remain vague, it appears that the RCs sought to equalize peasant land holding and set up a “correct” product exchange between town and country. The “unequal commodity exchange,” that is, grain requisitioning, continued to alienate the peasantry as the military skirmishes of the Civil War drew to a close. The movement met with particular success in Vol’sk *uezd*. Even though the union’s organizers emphasized their support for the Communists and Soviet power, the Cheka arrested those who set them up.<sup>44</sup> The police did so because the unions seemed all too similar to the SRs’ Union of Toiling Peasants (*Soiuz trudovogo krest’ianstva*) to be discussed later in this essay, whose purpose was to “overthrow Communist-Bolshevik power.”<sup>45</sup> And, in fact, rank-and-file RCs do not appear always to have appreciated the difference. The local Cheka reported that the peasant unions supported Soviet power in Saratov *uezd*, but not in the other districts.<sup>46</sup> Under fire, the RCs’ Central Committee instructed all party members to stop organizing new unions until the disagreement with the Bolsheviks was resolved.

### Co-optation amid repression: Relations with the Bolsheviks

In some district towns in Saratov province—Kamyshin, Atkarsk, Nikolaevsk, Serdobsk (and nearby Rtishchevo)—the Moscow events of mid-summer 1918 impaired relations between Left SRs and Bolsheviks, despite the conciliatory tone the Saratov Left SRs had taken. Bolshevik leaders in the locales were often outsiders, sent by Moscow or Saratov to bolster Soviet power, and they now had grounds to clash with the influential Left SRs. For example, in Kamyshin Mirbach’s murder caused a rupture between Left SRs and Bolsheviks, the result of a long-smoldering feud. In Kuznetsk where the Bolsheviks had campaigned hard against the Left SRs, *uezd* congresses brought in Left SR majorities, forcing the Communists to invite them to take part in the local executive committee.<sup>47</sup>

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43. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 85, ll. 15-22. See also Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Saratovskoi oblasti (GASO), f. 3310, op. 1, d. 1, l. 137.

44. The union’s regulations are found in TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 16, l. 15. Information on Vol’sk is found in *Ibid.*, l. 1, and in d. 15, l. 34-34 ob.

45. GASO, f. 521, op. 5, d. 11, ll. 13, 24; RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 1, d. 47, l. 33; Marc Jansen, *The Socialist-Revolutionary Party after October 1917: Documents from the S.-R. archives* (Amsterdam, 1989): 548.

46. GASO, f. 3310, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 124 ob-125.

47. *Znamia revoliutsii*, 1, 93 (Oct. 21, 1918): 4. The example of Kamyshin is found in Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 393, op. 3, d. 333, ll. 19 ob-20.

The Soviet government did not formally legalize the Revolutionary Communist Party until February 28, 1919. This delay gave local Communists considerable latitude in dealing with the RCs—as well as with the other parties. The Saratov province Communist Party organization agreed to work with the RC Party when it was founded in the fall of 1918, but to criticize its program.<sup>48</sup> Local Communists could afford to be “generous,” for some Saratov Revolutionary Communists publicly announced their withdrawal from the party and joined the Bolsheviks.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, in addressing the Saratov Soviet, whose meetings he sometimes co-chaired, Sapozhnikov continued to distance the party from the Left SRs.<sup>50</sup> Be that as it may, tension colored the Saratov RCs’ relations with the Bolsheviks. Balashov Bolsheviks ridiculed the new party’s name, but at first did not interfere with its activities. In Vol’sk the RC organization lacked representation in the executive committee despite the party’s popularity. Although the Commissariat of Land was in the hands of the Bolsheviks, “all of its members are former Left SRs and their land policies do not differ from ours at all,” claimed one RC, who added, “In Vol’sk almost all of the workers are on our side.” In Kuznetsk the local Bolshevik organization cooperated with the RCs until the arrival of a group from Moscow “who with all their might want to wipe us from the face of the earth.” They prevented the RCs from working in the villages, confiscated their equipment, and blocked them from taking part in a congress of the village poor.<sup>51</sup>

At this particular point during the Civil War there is little evidence of subtle Foucauldian co-optation, and plenty of evidence of coercion. Relations between the two parties rapidly deteriorated at year’s end as disagreements flared up over representation at the Fourth Congress of Peasant Deputies of Saratov Province held in December 1918,<sup>52</sup> and then as elections took place to village and *volost’* soviets in early 1919. Moscow’s recall of the influential Bolshevik leaders V. P. Antonov (Saratovskii) and M. I. Vasil’ev (Iuzhin) who had worked closely with Sapozhnikov may also have exacerbated tensions. Balashov Bolsheviks disbanded the RC organization in early 1919, “inviting” its members to join the Communist Party.<sup>53</sup> The Atkarsk Bolsheviks declared the local RC organization illegal, arrested the party’s *uezd* committee, prevented the party from holding meetings in rural areas, and interfered in elections to rural soviets—resorting to intimidation, armed force, and arrest—all in violation of the Soviet constitution. They justified excluding RCs from a local congress of soviets in February by claiming that the

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48. GA RF, f. 393, op. 3, d. 327, l. 103.

49. *Znamia revoliutsii*, 1, 93 (Oct. 21, 1918): 2.

50. GASO, f. 456, op. 1, d. 16, ll. 30-30 ob. See also V. P. Antonov-Saratovskii, ed., *Saratovskii Sovet...*, op. cit.: 724.

51. *Znamia revoliutsii*, 4, 96 (Nov. 29, 1918): 4.

52. M. Sagrad’ian, *art. cit.*: 117.

53. Sapozhnikov spoke out eloquently in Antonov and Vasil’ev’s defense. See GA RF, f. 1235, op. 93, d. 496, ll. 156-58. *Izvestiia Balashovskogo Iсполnitel’nogo komiteta*, 17 (Jan. 25, 1919): 4.



RCs everywhere opposed organization of the *kombedy* and backed the unity of the entire peasantry.<sup>54</sup> Finally, they informed both the Bolshevik provincial committee and the Central Committee in Moscow that they considered the Revolutionary Communists illegal “because the overwhelming majority of their organizations represent kulak elements.”<sup>55</sup> A resolution carried at the Third *Uezd* Congress of Revolutionary Communists in February 1919 complained that the Bolsheviks often prevented the RCs from meeting and that force was used during recent elections in the villages.<sup>56</sup> Other RC reports from the localities read like “indictments against the Bolsheviks,” for RC activists viewed them as a dirty riffraff, as political speculators seeking above all to avoid being packed off to the front.<sup>57</sup>

The Communist Party adopted a new spirit of accommodation during the “thaw” following the November 1918 revolution in Germany, which changed how it related to the RCs and other socialist parties. To be sure, local considerations, mainly the approach of the Whites, played a role as well. Admitting numerous cases of Bolshevik repression against RCs, the All-Russian Soviet Executive Committee in February 1919 declared the RCs a “Soviet” party.<sup>58</sup> At the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919 the Bolsheviks softened their dictatorship of the proletariat by openly courting the middle peasantry (recognizing the “power of the toiling people” (*vlast’ trudiashchikhsia*)). In early April the Central Committee of the RC Party asked Moscow to investigate abuses of power in Atkarsk and the use of force in elections to village soviets.<sup>59</sup> Following a visit to Atkarsk of Central Committee agent I. P. Flerovskii<sup>60</sup> in May, Saratov Bolsheviks agreed to let Revolutionary Communists take part in local government, thereby ending the period of “merciless coercion.”<sup>61</sup> The timing says a good deal about the motivations of both parties: Denikin’s troops moving against Saratov would have eagerly hanged the members of either. Moreover, a classified report reveals how disdained Soviet—Bolshevik—power was in the countryside. When White armies approached Balashov and Atkarsk, local Communists had to go into hiding for fear of reprisals. *Volost’* and

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54. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 52, ll. 2-5, 16-17; f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 4, l. 8; op. 2, d. 16, ll. 12-13; op. 2, d. 41, ll. 2-3. See *Krasnaia kommuna*, 150 (Feb. 28, 1919): 3-4; *Krasnaia gazeta*, 301 (March 6, 1919): 2, and GASO, f. 521, op. 6, d. 1, l. 116. The Bolshevik paper also suggests relations between the party and the RCs in Atkarsk were strained. See *Krasnaia kommuna*, 80 (Nov. 29, 1918): 4.

55. TsDNISO, f. 27, op. 1, d. 227, l. 9; M. Sagrad’ian, *art. cit.*: 119.

56. TsDNISO, f. 200, op. 1, d. 90, ll. 1-1 ob.

57. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 90, l. 8.

58. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 3, ll. 22-23. For Lenin’s views see *PSS*, vol. 41, 56-57 and vol. 50, 120. The legalization decree is found in *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti* (Moscow, 1958) IV: 451-452.

59. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 48, ll. 17-20. See also RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 1, d. 66, ll. 5-6 ob and d. 1, l. 31.

60. (1888-1959). A former member of the Kronstadt Soviet and a delegate to the Bolshevik Sixth Party Congress, Flerovskii became a member of the Saratov *Gubkom* and *Gubispolkom* in June 1919.

61. GASO, f. 456, op. 1, ed. khr. 48, l. 103; TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 48, l. 12.

village soviets ignored decrees of the Soviet government and, in some *volosti* in Balashov, openly supported Denikin. The report admits that without the assistance of a well-armed detachment to combat desertion, the party would have lost the villages. While the document criticizes the Revolutionary Communists' opposition to Bolshevik agrarian policy, it notes that the party's provincial committee habitually affirmed its loyalty to Soviet power.<sup>62</sup> And it did: The party's leadership instructed local members, even those who complained about Bolshevik repression, to cooperate with Lenin's party during such trying times.<sup>63</sup> As a result, some local Communists highly valued their populist allies.<sup>64</sup>

An agreement reached between the two party committees in Saratov in May 1919 allowed the Revolutionary Communists to carry out party work in the villages and garrison, and to participate in soviets and their executive committees at all levels. RCs and Bolsheviks would collaborate in sending out agitators to the districts, and the Bolshevik Party would fund RC Party work and publications. Periodically, the two parties would hold joint meetings. Revolutionary Communists would also report any subversive activities to the Cheka.<sup>65</sup> Yet the sources disprove the assessment of Soviet historian Iu. Shestak, who claims that "Bolsheviks in the provinces showed the utmost in good will in establishing relations with Revolutionary Communist organizations," and in fact, as Suslov argues, the initiative to normalize and improve relations always came from the RCs.<sup>66</sup> The document Saratov Bolshevik leader Ivanov circulated to his associates in the locales regarding the arrangement stressed the need to work with the RCs because they were a legal party. But Ivanov cautioned his fellow Bolsheviks to be vigilant, for the "petit-bourgeois" (i.e., peasant) nature of the party would eventually reveal itself in a manner "similar to that of the earlier uprising of the Left SRs."<sup>67</sup> Bolshevik organizations in Vol'sk and Atkarsk soon invited the RCs to join the provincial and city executive committees; however, some local Bolsheviks ignored the new line, even during the dangerous days of summer.<sup>68</sup> For example, the Vol'sk Bolshevik organization announced that it "considered legalization [of

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62. GASO, f. 521, op. 3, d. 15, ll. 8-9.

63. See, for example, TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 55, l. 87.

64. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 1, l. 12.

65. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 50, l. 6; d. 77, l. 16. The Saratov Bolshevik Committee was split over the matter of collaborating with the Revolutionary Communists, but the majority eventually recognized the need for joint work in the countryside. See M. Sagrad'ian, *art. cit.*: 112-113.

66. Iu. I. Shestak, *Bol'sheviki i levye techeniia...*, *op. cit.*: 24 (quote) and 40-41; Iu. P. Suslov, *Sotsialisticheskie partii ...*, *op. cit.*: 42.

67. M. Sagrad'ian, *art. cit.*: 111.

68. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 4, l. 1. See Atkarsk RC leader Tataev's reply to the "bilious" letter sent by local Bolsheviks who "ironically" claimed that they had once again bent over backward to accommodate the RCs, TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 8, l. 5. Vol'sk RCs issued a joint statement with local Bolsheviks that admitted Soviet power's mistakes. See *Rabochii i krest'ianin*, 146 (July 3, 1919): 2.

the RCs] possible in principle.”<sup>69</sup> Be that as it may, the RCs still had difficulty in organizing cells, “thanks to the unwillingness of local Bolsheviks to carry out the policies of the Center.”<sup>70</sup> A Balashov Bolshevik reported to the Central Committee that the party’s new conciliatory policy in relation to the middle peasants bred confusion and evoked disbelief. Admitting the hold SR Maximalists and “peasant Bolsheviks” (RCs) had over the peasants, especially in Turki and the villages of Ivanovka and Alekseevka, he expressed doubts about the decision reached at the Eighth Congress. The local peasantry also expressed doubts: “the peasants in the *uezd* don’t believe the Communists and don’t respect them.”<sup>71</sup>

Even during the heyday of cooperation, it was not unusual for the Bolshevik press to portray the RCs as a party of kulaks opposed to Soviet policies.<sup>72</sup> And, in fact, RC activists in the villages opposed to Bolshevik practices often sided with the peasantry against the latter. Local Bolsheviks complained that RCs stirred up the peasantry against Soviet power by promoting the slogans, “Down with the Bolsheviks! Long live Soviet power!” Confidential Revolutionary Communist sources admit that the party’s rural cells often comprised “kulak and White Guard elements”; in other words, the peasantry saw the party as populist and therefore in support of its interests, which they could not reconcile with Bolshevik policies. The Vol’sk RC organization declared that it had the right to disband cells in the event “they comprise kulak and White Guard elements,” and that even though the mood in the *uezd* favored party work, two things hampered it: fear of arrest owing to Bolshevik opposition to the party, and the fear of having kulak and White Guard elements predominate in their organizations.<sup>73</sup> The RCs’ concern over arrest must not be dismissed.<sup>74</sup> All in all, the elliptical evidence suggests a rift between the RC leaders in Saratov (and *uezd* towns) and party activists in the villages, whose origins can be found in the party’s opposition to the *kombedy* and to the food brigades that frequented the area in the second half of 1918.

Despite (as a result of?) the “agreement” reached in the spring of 1919 with the Bolsheviks, which enabled the RCs to carry out work in the villages, cooperation with the Bolsheviks began to break down as soon as the threat posed by the Whites receded,<sup>75</sup> especially in those *uezdy* where local Bolshevik leaders took pride in their revolutionary pedigree. For example, Petrovsk’s Neibakh seemed especially

69. TsDNISO, f. 27, op. 1, d. 236, l. 3.

70. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 1, l. 3.

71. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 53, l. 6. The Union of SR Maximalists was active in town in early 1919. See *Izvestiia Balashovskogo Ispolnitel’nogo komiteta*, 22 (Jan. 31, 1919): 4.

72. GASO, f. 521, op. 3, d. 15, ll. 8-9. This remained true of the press well into 1920. See, for example, *Rabochii i krest’ianin* (Vol’sk), 66 (March 25, 1920): 2.

73. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 70, l. 1.

74. See *Izvestiia Atkarskogo uispolkoma*, 234 (June 26, 1919): 4; TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 5, ll. 14-15; op. 2, d. 42, l. 18. Some peasants were sympathetic to the RCs because there were fewer “scoundrels” among them. See op. 1, d. 71, l. 2.

75. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 42, ll. 1-4. Also in *Znania revoliutsii*, 2 (Sept. 30, 1919): 3.

determined to rid his *uezd* of “counterrevolutionary” RC influence. To get his way, he interfered in local elections.<sup>76</sup> During the second half of 1919 the Revolutionary Communists denounced the Communists’ efforts to curb the party’s representation at local congresses.<sup>77</sup> At a provincial congress of soviets in September 1919, the RCs complained the Bolsheviks did everything possible “to cut down our representation to a minimum, including the reelection of [...] delegations [...] and the calling of emergency *uezd* congresses of soviets.” The RCs protested the Bolsheviks’ selection and promotion of “non-party” deputies, who were organized into a separate fraction at the congress (the tactic backfired on the Bolsheviks since they were unable to control the non-party representatives who turned out to be Right SRs.) Resolutions proposed by the RCs critical of centralization and of the government’s food supply policies were voted down. The Bolsheviks also denied the RCs’ request for proportional representation in the newly elected provincial executive committee, offering the party only two places. “Guided by the interests of the revolution [...] our fraction was forced to accept this,” lamented one RC leader.<sup>78</sup>

When the Saratov RC organization held its second provincial congress in September 1919, delegates from the villages and district centers expressed concern over the Saratov city committee’s unequivocal support for the Communists. Local reports observed a rise in the party’s fortunes and its growing popularity among the masses, but also emphasized a cautious and “malevolent” attitude from the Bolsheviks, who placed obstacles in the party’s way. Moreover, delegates assailed the policy of non-partisanship in the villages, which “gives negative results, for it brings together the very worst elements of the villages and hinders the development of our class-oriented populist ideas.”

The Revolutionary Communists sought to extract a price for their commitment to Soviet power, at times exaggerating the extent of Bolshevik antipathy.<sup>79</sup> In Atkarsk in June 1919 they demanded almost half the seats in the presidium selected at an *uezd* congress. This happened in Novouzensk *uezd* in September, and in Petrovsk later in the year.<sup>80</sup> Further, whenever the RC position was fortified, the party took up the peasant question, the real source of conflict with the Bolsheviks. At an *uezd* congress of soviets in Vol’sk at the end of 1919, Revolutionary Communists blasted out against Bolshevik land policies and called upon the RC Party to carry out independent work within the land department “to end the use of force against the peasants.” They also denounced several Bolshevik candidates nominated to the Vol’sk executive committee, while RC delegates from the villages called for the election of members “who would seize the Bolsheviks by the throat.”<sup>81</sup> Fearing the RCs’ demands to raise fixed prices for grain would

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76. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 52, ll. 91-93; op. 1, d. 50, l. 31.

77. See, for example, the complaint found in *Znamia revoliutsii*, 1 (Sept. 5, 1919): 1.

78. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 43, ll. 7, 60. See also *Znamia revoliutsii*, 2 (Sept. 30, 1919): 4.

79. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 1, d. 45, l. 10.

80. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 52, ll. 66-70, 91-99.

81. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 53, l. 12.

undermine the state's bread campaign, local Bolsheviks attacked the RCs with great hostility.<sup>82</sup>

In late 1919 and early 1920 a new period of repression against the RCs set in, perhaps owing to the growing factionalism within the Bolshevik Party so much in evidence at the Ninth Party Congress in March-April 1920, and to the confidence that came with victory over the Whites. The Saratov RC committee demanded explanations from the Cheka regarding the arrests of party members in certain locales.<sup>83</sup> Relations soured in Serdobs'k over the RCs' disagreements with Bolshevik economic policies.<sup>84</sup> Bolsheviks in Ivanovskaia *volost'*, Balashov *uezd*, disbanded the executive committee, seized its money, and arrested its members. During the episode the head of the police raped the wife of a local RC leader. Peasants also bitterly complained to the Cheka about the brutality of special Red Army units under the command of a certain Cheremukhin that were sent to "pacify" the countryside. The Vol'sk RC committee contended that in 1920 "terror" had been unleashed against them as reports of illegal arrests emanated from the countryside. Atkarsk RCs also protested an array of transgressions.<sup>85</sup>

Even though reports flowed in from the rural areas of serious disagreements between the Bolsheviks and RCs, the latter's leaders continued to back Soviet power. The mood in the villages had again turned against Bolshevik policies, owing to military conscription and the enlisting of civilians for compulsory labor, but RC leaders called upon local party members not to take advantage of this to strengthen their own position, and instead to explain to the peasantry why it was in their own best interests to work for the Soviet cause. Maintaining that the only way out of the situation was the joining together of both Soviet parties, the RC organization favored "a rapprochement (*sblizhenie*) within the toiling population," satisfying its greatest needs, quick socialization of land and a struggle against "the caprice of local and central agents."<sup>86</sup>

### **The extent of the Revolutionary Communists' influence**

As suggested, the Communist Party's backing away from its extreme—and ineffectual—policies in the villages (particularly in regard to the *kombedy*) and Saratov's falling under siege in the summer of 1919 gave the Revolutionary Communists the opportunity to function legally as a "Soviet party," but not without undue harassment. Soon Revolutionary Communist Party organizations appeared

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82. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 91, l. 2; Iu. P. Suslov, *Sotsialisticheskie partii ...*, op. cit.: 78.

83. See TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 16, 94. In Balakovo RCs were arrested, allegedly for "counterrevolutionary" activities. See *Ibid.*, f. 1328, op. 1, d. 43, l. 1.

84. *Serp i molot*, 98, 382 (May 15, 1920): 2.

85. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 12, ll. 24 ob-26; d. 21, l. 15; TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 42, l. 9; op. 3, d. 15, ll. 11, 22.

86. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 14, l. 12.

everywhere radical populist elements traditionally had been found in Saratov province. Soviet historians argue that outside Saratov it was rare to encounter strong RC groups at the *uezd* level such as those that existed in Atkarsk, Balashov, Vol'sk, Pugachevsk, and Serdobsks districts. New research, however, might serve to revise this impression.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the Revolutionary Communists had a great deal in common with the Borotbists (*Borot'bisty*), the "Ukrainian Left SRs."<sup>88</sup> In any event, before May 1919 there were about thirty-three local RC organizations and cells throughout Saratov province and an active *uezd* committee existed in Atkarsk. After the change in political climate, however, *uezd* committees formed in Saratov, Vol'sk, Petrovsk, and Serdobsks; thirty-six new party cells and organizations were set up, and individual party members carried out work in the districts.<sup>89</sup> When Saratov fell under siege in late summer 1919, party organizations existed in five *uezdy* and RCs could be found in four *uezd* executive committees and in two of their presidiums. In addition, the party set up an *oblast'* bureau joining party organizations in nine neighboring provinces. The bureau was revived in the spring of 1920.<sup>90</sup>

Unfortunately, the sources do not reveal how strong the Revolutionary Communists were numerically. Party enrolments remained in flux; frequent mobilizations depleted local committees; and, as noted, local party cells bitterly protested Bolshevik repression, often refusing to provide information about themselves. Shestak claims that party organizations existed in fifteen provinces at the end of 1918 with 4,300 members and sympathizers and that 1,625 remained in the party at the time of its collapse in 1920.<sup>91</sup> Writing on Saratov province, Sagrad'ian adduces figures that raise serious suspicions. According to him, the Saratov city RC organization had only 93 members in 1918 and 300 members and sympathizers in 1919.<sup>92</sup> My count of the number of members/sympathizers in the

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87. RC organizations functioned in Astrakhan', Gorokhovets, Voronezh, Kineshma, Kazan', Kaluga, Peremyshchev, Kiev, Kostroma, L'vov, Moscow, Minsk, Penza, Kerensk, Petrograd, Doldino station, Saratov, Atkarsk, Balashov, Vol'sk, Simbirsk, Smolensk, Iukhnov, Viaz'ma, Krasnyi Kut, Pugachevsk, Tambov, Tver', Rzhev, Torzhsk, Mendelinsk, Iaroslavl', Uglich, and Urzhum. See TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 21, l. 1-1 ob. This list is not comprehensive. See, for example, M. Sagrad'ian, *art. cit.*: 110.

88. The Borotbists also remained allies of the Ukrainian Communists until the former merged with the latter in March 1920. Like the RCs, the Borotbists disagreed with the Bolsheviks over the peasant question and the leading role of the proletariat in the revolutionary process. The Borotbists' support of Ukrainian nationalism drove another wedge between them and the Leninists. See Jurij Borys, "Political parties in the Ukraine," in Taras Hunczak, ed., *The Ukraine, 1917-1921: A study in Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977): 135-140, and Ivan Maistrenko, *Borotbism: A chapter in the history of Ukrainian Communism*, trans. by George S. N. Luckyj with the assistance of Ivan L. Rudnytsky (New York, 1954).

89. *Znamia revoliutsii*, 2 (Sept. 30, 1919): 3.

90. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 1, d. 45, ll. 30-30 ob.

91. Iu. I. Shestak, *Bol'sheviki i levye tcheniia...*, *op. cit.*: 33; M. V. Spirina, *Krakh melkoburzhuaiznoi kontseptsii...*, *op. cit.*: 202. These figures suspiciously ignore 1919, when party strength reached its peak. They also seem low when the incomplete figures for Saratov are considered.

92. M. Sagrad'ian, *art. cit.*: 110.

Vol'sk and Atkarsk organizations in 1918 comes to 355 and 758 respectively.<sup>93</sup> In late 1919 there were 1,432 party members and sympathizers in five districts of Saratov province. Suslov has recently challenged the notion that membership had begun to decline already in the second half of 1919, arguing that the party could still dictate its policies in these *uezdy*.<sup>94</sup>

Who joined the party? At the national level, 77% of the party's membership consisted of peasants, and 11%, workers. Former Left SRs made up the party's national leadership. Peasants enrolling in the party described themselves as middle or poor peasants, or, more often, simply did not differentiate at all. But military service among party members was almost universal, suggesting the extent to which the party comprised younger males and to which military service served as a school for radicalism.<sup>95</sup> Data on the composition of the Saratov city RC organization indicate it would be a distortion to describe the RCs merely as an offshoot of the Left SRs (although this appears to have been the case in the districts). Among the members of the Saratov committee were 12 (former) SRs, 14 Left SRs, 16 SDs (presumably Bolsheviks), 13 Mensheviks, 4 anarchists, 6 SD internationalists, and 20 foreigners. Later, 25% of the Saratov organization were workers, 40% were peasants, and 35% were members of the intelligentsia.<sup>96</sup>

The party's strength remained in the districts, where it played its greatest role in 1919. At the end of the year, three RCs took part in the Atkarsk district executive committee (and three in Serdobsk, four in Balashov, and five in Kuznetsk). They also fared well in elections to congresses of soviets in some *uezdy*.<sup>97</sup> The sources indicate that new members continued to join the party and new cells formed (and collapsed) throughout the party's existence, well into 1920. Information from 1920 about Lopukhovskaia *volost'*, Atkarsk *uezd*, admittedly a non-representative *volost'*, lists 50 Bolsheviks, 45 Bolshevik sympathizers, 118 RCs, and 610 RC sympathizers.<sup>98</sup> As of February 1, 1920, there were twenty-three active party cells in Atkarsk *uezd* with about 100 members and 700 sympathizers. Eight of the cells had been founded in 1918, eight in 1919, and seven in 1920. The oldest were the largest.<sup>99</sup> New cells appeared in Vol'sk villages in 1920 as well.<sup>100</sup> While the RCs may not have represented "a serious force at the national level," a confidential

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93. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 35, ll. 1-53.

94. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, d. 2, ll. 72-73, 84, 90-91; Iu. P. Suslov, *Sotsialisticheskie partii ...*, op. cit.: 38, 79.

95. These figures are found in Iu. I. Shestak, *Bol'sheviki i levye techeniia...*, op. cit.: 21, and the information on military service in TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 22.

96. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 34, ll. 1-27.

97. M. Sagrad'ian, *art. cit.*: 113; the archives contain individual petitions to join the party in 1918 and 1919, but there is no way of knowing how many petitions of this sort were actually written. See, for example, TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 61; op. 1, d. 97.

98. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 40, l. 3.

99. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 102, l. 1.

100. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 97, l. 7.

report from mid-1920 admits their strength in Saratov province, especially in Saratov, Atkarsk, Vol'sk, and elsewhere.<sup>101</sup>

### The Revolutionary Communists in Atkarsk

The Revolutionary Communists enjoyed their greatest support in Atkarsk district, which, in spite of its proximity to Saratov, lacked a healthy Bolshevik Party organization until late summer 1918, when a group of Ukrainian activists arrived in Atkarsk. Fearing the Ukrainians' departure would result in a serious blow to local activities, owing to the strength of anti-Communist sentiments within the *uezd*, the Atkarsk Bolsheviks lobbied to keep the outsiders there after their recall by Moscow.<sup>102</sup> In view of their vulnerability, local Bolsheviks prevented any RCs from entering the presidium of an *uezd* congress of soviets in November 1918, even though they made up 20% of the delegates.<sup>103</sup> At the time, local Bolsheviks carried a resolution in support of Red Terror, articulating a version of the revolution, according to which only the Communist Party, "which had made the October Revolution," represented a true revolutionary force in the country.<sup>104</sup>

In early 1919 the party's internal language, the language of classified and confidential reports that were not intended for mass consumption, underscored a variety of problems that beset the Atkarsk Bolshevik organization, ranging from economic collapse and disorganization to anti-Soviet feelings among individuals working for the local soviet.<sup>105</sup> Further, rumors circulated in Elansk that Red Army units had risen up against the Communists.<sup>106</sup> As we have seen, the Atkarsk Bolshevik organization declared the RC Party organization illegal, but the latter reacted bitterly, taking its case to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. In what must have been unfavorable circumstances, the RCs succeeded in sending 24 party members and 64 sympathizers to a district congress in March 1919, attended by 96 Bolshevik delegates and 101 sympathizers.<sup>107</sup> When Denikin's forces had placed the province under siege and the Communists sought accommodation with

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101. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 83, ll. 2-3.

102. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 26, 50; op. 1, d. 19, l. 32. A report on the establishment of a party cell in Balanda shows how volatile political attitudes were at this time; roughly 25% of those constituting the cell had to be expelled for not being Communists. See f. 200, op. 1, d. 12, l. 27.

103. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, d. 32, l. 3. The Atkarsk newspaper claims that RCs carried out agitation against the Bolsheviks and took part in local uprisings.

104. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 1-2.

105. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 2-2 ob, 7; op. 1, d. 42, l. 5.

106. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 56, l. 18. According to the rumors, F. K. Mironov had issued an appeal to the local population to fight against the Communists.

107. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 92, l. 1. At this conference the Bolsheviks said that the RCs inflicted "traitorous stabs in the back of the revolution" by opposing the *kombedy* and promoting the union of all peasants. See V. P. Antonov-Saratovskii, *Sovety v epokhu voennogo kommunizma: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1929), pt. II: 424-425.



the “peasant Bolsheviks,” the RCs fared better at local congresses. A congress in June drew 83 Communists/sympathizers and 53 RCs/sympathizers. The figures for September 1919 were 55 and 37 respectively.<sup>108</sup> However, the RCs most likely were underrepresented: the local organization boasted 800 members already in 1918, approximately the size of the Bolshevik organization a year later.<sup>109</sup>

Other sources confirm the revival in Revolutionary Communist Party fortunes, but also that the Atkarsk Bolsheviks once again adopted a hard line toward their populist rivals.<sup>110</sup> An Atkarsk Bolshevik in August 1919 insisted the RCs were “nothing more and nothing less than a blockhead with eyes.” Emphasizing the RCs’ “lack of ideas,” he acknowledged that the party “is needed by us until it fulfills all of our orders. When it stops fulfilling them, we’ll throw them out on their ears.”<sup>111</sup> In September the Atkarsk RC committee informed Saratov that “relations with the Bolsheviks were becoming worse and worse,” in part owing to the Revolutionary Communists’ uncovering of abuses in the local soviet’s department of social services.<sup>112</sup> Writing to its Central Committee, the RCs protested the mean-spirited behavior of the “dishonest” local Bolsheviks, their arbitrary policies in the countryside, and the arrest of party members purportedly for no reason at all.<sup>113</sup> In November the RCs refused to reveal the location of its party cells in the countryside or to tell how many members the party had. Bolshevik insistence that their request was for informational purposes fell on deaf ears.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, the two parties clashed over representation at another congress of soviets,<sup>115</sup> when Bolsheviks ignored calls for proportional representation.<sup>116</sup> While local Bolsheviks accused the RCs of seeking to undermine their authority,<sup>117</sup> the RC *uezd* committee complained to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee that “persecution [...] is constant.” It insisted that the Cheka had prevented it from forming an armed band when Denikin’s forces threatened the district, that elections to the village and *volost*’ soviets had been carried out under dubious circumstances, that local Bolsheviks attacked them in the press and sought to limit their support at local congresses, and

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108. *Izvestiia Atkarskogo Ispolnitel'nogo komiteta*, 238 (July 1, 1919): 3; 297 (Sept. 10, 1919): 3.

109. That is, after “party week.” TsDNISO, f. 200, op. 1, d. 43, l. 23.

110. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 45, l. 111; f. 27, op. 1, d. 18, l. 31.

111. *Ibid.*, f. 27, op. 1, d. 227, l. 45.

112. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 48, l. 14; RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 12, l. 21. See also II. 24 ob-26.

113. GA RF, f. 9591, op. 1, d. 67 (the entire *delo*); TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 4, l. 48.

114. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 21, l. 16; TsDNISO, f. 200, op. 1, d. 87, l. 14. The RCs had issued a circular to local activists to form party cells, but not of whole villages. See TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 30, l. 35.

115. TsDNISO, f. 200, op. 1, d. 45, l. 103.

116. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 30, ll. 4-4 ob, 10.

117. *Izvestiia Atkarskogo Ispolnitel'nogo komiteta*, 369 (Dec. 7, 1919): 3.

that the local Cheka turned a blind eye to corruption, instead focusing its attention on attacking the Revolutionary Communists.<sup>118</sup>

Repression undoubtedly accounts for the RCs' poor showing at local congresses at the start of 1920, when their central committee formally complained to the All-Russian Executive Committee about the Atkarsk Cheka's capricious encroachment upon the RCs.<sup>119</sup> In connection with serious threats to Soviet power and the Bolsheviks' need to compromise once again in mid-1920, the RCs' fortunes improved significantly; it now accounted for a full third of the members of the local executive committee. Its deputies constituted 19 of the 44 sent from the *uezd* for a provincial congress of soviets in Saratov, which the RCs' P. S. Sapozhnikov chaired.<sup>120</sup>

With the "brilliant" victories of the Red Army, there was widespread belief among RCs that a period of peaceful development would begin, which would enable them to influence Bolshevik policies in the villages.<sup>121</sup> But conflict between the two parties continued. Complaints were lodged regarding police harassment and Bolshevik attempts to discredit the RCs as "counterrevolutionary" and even "criminal" elements.<sup>122</sup> In August 1920 RCs demanded the Bolsheviks provide proof for their accusations that the RCs plotted to overthrow Soviet power, organized kulak elements in the countryside, and participated in other traitorous behavior.<sup>123</sup> Expressing their total support for Soviet power, Atkarsk RCs denounced the repression, insisting that they were not about to break with their tactics and merge with other populist groups.<sup>124</sup>

The weakness of the Bolshevik Party in Atkarsk undoubtedly accounts for its hostility toward the Revolutionary Communists. If on paper the Atkarsk Communist Party organization continued to grow during 1920 (by spring registering 111 cells with 2,267 members and 64 sympathizers), real problems lay behind the statistics. A report described work in the countryside as "very poor." Local Communists functioned without coordination, while personal rivalries and "lack of consciousness" obstructed the activities of the *uezd* committee. Finally, there were many "paper" Communists in the district; peasants who had enrolled in local organizations often quit the party after they had a chance to study its program.<sup>125</sup> A party conference in May admitted that the peasantry's attitudes

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118. TsDNISO, f. 27, op. 1, d. 634, ll. 103-4.

119. *Ibid.*, f. 27, op. 1, d. 635, l. 18.

120. *Izvestiia Atkarskogo Soveta*, 30 (Feb. 10, 1920): 1; *Izvestiia Atkarskogo Ispolnitel'nogo komiteta*, 240 (July 3, 1920): 4.

121. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 25, ll. 10-10 ob.

122. For example, see TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 41, l. 5; op. 2, d. 31, l. 3; op. 2, d. 32, l. 69; f. 200, op. 1, d. 204, ll. 8-9; f. 27, op. 1, d. 635, l. 1; RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 1, d. 1, l. 32 ob; d. 66, ll. 4, 8.

123. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 33, l. 24.

124. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 46, ll. 8-9.

125. TsDNISO, f. 200, op. 1, d. 126, ll. 1, 2 ob, 3.

toward Soviet power “were not particularly good,” owing to its food supply policies, grain requisitions, and relentless mobilizations of manpower, resources and supplies.<sup>126</sup> The newly elected *uezdkom* began functioning in conditions of “complete breakdown” of Soviet institutions and party organizations.<sup>127</sup>

The grim prospects might well have driven the two party organizations into each other’s arms, for by May 1920 relations showed some sign of improvement. RC propaganda now harshly criticized the SRs and Mensheviks.<sup>128</sup> At an *uezd* conference of the RC Party held at the end of October 1920, stormy applause met a report by an activist named Tataev on the national conference of Revolutionary Communists, which had resolved to join with the Bolsheviks into a single all-Russian Communist Party.<sup>129</sup> Yet this did little to fortify Soviet power locally. A year later Tataev, now a Communist, gave the closing words at an *uezd* conference, which noted widespread apathy within the district’s Communist Party organization and that many of those working in Soviet institutions did so merely to obtain food rations.<sup>130</sup>

### Problems from within

Serious problems beset the Revolutionary Communist Party from the onset, which had much to do with a confused identity and with serious disagreement over how to reconcile pronounced support for Soviet power with the peasantry’s open hostility to Bolshevik policies. Two months after Left SR renegades formed the Revolutionary Communist Party, five members of its Central Committee withdrew from the body to join the Communists. The other left populist party formed at the time, the Popular Communists, merged with the Bolsheviks. Saratov RCs responded by insisting the party must continue to exist *until it convinced the Bolsheviks to accept the entire class of toiling peasantry as an active participant in the building of socialism*. This sentiment more than anything else helps us understand the character of the party in Saratov province.<sup>131</sup> Expressing faith in the ultimate union of *all* left socialist groups, it rejected the actions of the Central Committee members who had abandoned the party.<sup>132</sup> But at the local level, too,

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126. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 126, ll. 6-6 ob.

127. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 135, l. 2.

128. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 25, l. 19; d. 24, l. 15.

129. TsDNISO, f. 200, op. 1, d. 126, l. 37.

130. *Ibid.*, f. 200, op. 1, d. 279, ll. 25-32.

131. It also reveals a sentiment so prevalent among Left SR leaders known as “Golgothism,” that is, that they were fated to be martyrs to the revolutionary cause.

132. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 32, l. 1. Those who quit were A. A. Aleksandrov, A. Bitsenko, M. Dobrokhodov, A. Kolegaev, and V. Chernyi.

some of the party's founding members switched allegiance to the Bolsheviks.<sup>133</sup> RCs continued to withdraw from the party, usually to become Bolsheviks, until the party merged with the Communist Party at the end of 1920. As a legal party, the RCs were also liable for frequent mobilizations; during the summer of 1919 participation in such campaigns depleted the party's ranks and resulted in the collapse of local groups.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, the existence of two parties whose official names contained the word "Communist" bred so much confusion in Saratov province that some local Communists began calling themselves Bolsheviks once again.<sup>135</sup>

Other problems that plagued the RCs were similar to those hampering the Bolsheviks. For example, the RC Central Committee acknowledged that party members ignored instructions, often claiming lack of time because of their involvement in soviet work, while others disregarded summons by the Red Army.<sup>136</sup> Party members also refused to participate in village and *volost'* soviets, observing that there was no one to tend their fields.<sup>137</sup> Others were accused of various abuses, such as hiding deserters.<sup>138</sup> The RCs likewise suffered from a decentralized organizational structure, which enabled local leaders to interpret general policies as they saw fit. The Bolshevik V. A. Radus-Zenkovich observed strains within the local RC leadership and a decline in Sapozhnikov's authority.<sup>139</sup>

The party's success during the second half of 1919 along with the Bolsheviks' vulnerability promoted dialogue among radical populist groups and parties regarding merger. Four of the nine members of the RC Party's Central Committee who backed the union of all revolutionary socialist populist parties into a new party, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, were expelled from the committee.<sup>140</sup> Ustinov vehemently opposed union, arguing that a new party of this sort would turn into a

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133. Two of the three RC representatives on the Atkarsk executive committee joined the Bolsheviks in December 1918 and voted to remove the remaining RC from the committee. GA RF, f. 393, op. 3, d. 330, l. 57. For another discussion of problems within the party in late 1918 see TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 17, l. 8.

134. See, for instance, TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 98, ll. 4-4 ob.

135. M. Sagrad'ian, *art. cit.*: 121.

136. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 49, l. 47; op. 3, d. 4, l. 39. See also RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 3, l. 78. Violations of party discipline was the most frequently cited cause for expulsion from the Saratov RC Party organization in 1919 and 1920 (followed by promoting Left SR tactics, anti-socialist behavior, and desertion from the front). TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 108, l. 1.

137. For example, see TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 33, l. 19; op. 2, d. 33, l. 3. One report denounces a "sympathizer" who announced he would join the party in order to avoid soviet work. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 93, l. 7.

138. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 2, d. 32, l. 54.

139. V. P. Antonov-Saratovskii, *Sovety v epokhu voennogo kommunizma...*, *op. cit.*, II: 46-47. See also TsDNISO, f. 27, op. 1, d. 491, l. 149.

140. Among those opposed to merger were Ustinov, Koval'skaia, and Andreev. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 67, l. 2. Apparently, an attempt had been made before this to take advantage of the absence of one Central Committee member to force the issue of union. See TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 47, l. 5, also RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 2, d. 3, l. 94.

third, anti-Bolshevik force. Insisting that the revolution's development would compel other populist groups eventually to adopt the RCs' program, the party eschewed any compromise platform in order to preserve the class and revolutionary nature of its program and draw others to it.<sup>141</sup> At the Revolutionary Communist Party's Fourth Congress in October 1919, the majority of delegates shot down proposals to unite with other populists, but only after some protested that force had been used to prevent delegates from attending who supported an anti-Ustinov, pro-merger point of view.<sup>142</sup> Following the congress, the Central Committee minority informed all party organizations that a founding congress of the Revolutionary Socialist Populist Party had been held in Moscow, that the Central Committee of the Left SR-Internationalists recently released from prison had joined the organizational bureau, and that the *Narod* (People) group expelled by the Right SRs was also considering joining.<sup>143</sup> Although most local organizations opposed union, the Moscow committee as well as one in nearby Penza province backed the idea. In Saratov, RCs in Vol'sk reiterated that only the Bolsheviks and RCs represented real *revolutionary* parties, and they called for setting up an intra-party bureau on the basis of equal representation. (The Vol'sk newspaper was soon renamed *Rabochii i krest'ianin* (*Worker and Peasant*) to reflect the spirit of hoped-for cooperation.) Atkarsk RCs likewise stated that they shared common ideals with the Bolsheviks.<sup>144</sup> Ironically, the RCs treated their fellow populists the way the Bolsheviks dealt with the Revolutionary Communists. At the same time, the very fact that discussions about merger were held makes clear why local Communists feared the Revolutionary Communists might one day link with other populist groups.

The merger that eventually came was of an altogether different sort, for serious ruptures within the party surfaced at its Fifth Party Congress in the spring of 1920. Struggling to sort out the historical process as it unfolded, the RCs' Sapozhnikov and Ustinov now took giant steps toward acknowledging the Bolsheviks' narrative of the revolution. The party's acceptance of the authority of the Third Communist International, and the Bolshevik victory over the Whites, provided the context that compelled both theorists to break with some long-held populist principles. In his "April Thesis," undoubtedly named after Lenin's famous theses of April 1917, Sapozhnikov admitted the leading role of the proletariat in relation to other social groups. Drawing on the writings of nineteenth-century populist theorists, he tried to explain why social revolution had taken place in "backward" Russia. In answering the question, he convinced himself that the dictatorship of the proletariat had evolved *logically*, that opposition to it was *reactionary*, and that it would *eventually* establish a dictatorship of *all* toilers. Similarly, Ustinov came to accept the

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141. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 47, l. 11. Some RCs supported the idea of the party's merging with other left populist groups. See op. 1, d. 60, l. 1.

142. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 47, l. 9 (V. Bazel', V. Zitt, G. Maksimov, E. Semenovskaia).

143. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 67, l. 9.

144. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 4, l. 34, (for Atkarsk), op. 2, d. 32, l. 16.

historical necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Rejecting potential criticism that he had abandoned the populist world view in exchange for that of the Marxists, he maintained there was no longer a need for loyal opposition parties. Arguing as he had before that the proletarian state could serve as the basis for the eventual implementation of the populist ideal, he called upon his critics to put an end to their beliefs (now prejudices), which history had shown to be wrong.<sup>145</sup> Disbanding the congress despite the wishes of the majority, the party Central Committee clearly stood at a crossroads.<sup>146</sup>

Given the Central Committee's stand during the Fifth Congress, subsequent developments come as no surprise. The Second Comintern Congress in July 1920 ruled that only one Communist Party in each country could be represented in the Comintern. Attending the congress, Ustinov and Sapozhnikov declared their Central Committee's readiness to subordinate the party to the decisions of the Communist International. The party's Central Committee then issued a secret declaration to the Comintern. Calling Revolutionary Communism the Communist wing of revolutionary populism, it stated the party's willingness to march in a single revolutionary front with the Bolsheviks. It also spelled out the disagreements, based on theoretical differences, that had prevented union in the past, including the nature of the historical process, the character of the class struggle, the class basis of the socialist revolution, and the organization of power.<sup>147</sup> The Sixth Congress of the Revolutionary Communist Party in late September 1920 resolved to merge with the Bolsheviks, and in October *Izvestiia* reported that individual members of the RC Party were enrolling in the Communists' ranks. Watching over these developments, the Cheka had promoted the rift that had been growing within the RC Party in regard to merger.<sup>148</sup>

As suggested, in seeing the writing on the wall, Saratov RC leaders such as Sapozhnikov had sought to rationalize the movement toward merger by drawing on the party's intellectual heritage. Once the decision had been taken to form a united Communist Party, local organizations complied. The Balashov *uezd* organization disbanded, observing that no real work had been carried out in 1920, except in a few locales. Village cells formed earlier in the year apparently had done so on an erroneous premise, believing the party was one that opposed the Bolsheviks, and not one that backed a revolutionary front with them.<sup>149</sup> The Saratov *uezd* organization discussed and accepted the Comintern decision at a congress in mid-September 1920, after which 18 of the organization's 160 members joined the

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145. M. V. Spirina, *Krakh melkoburzhaznoi kontseptsii...*, op. cit.: 196-200; Iu. I. Shestak, *Bol'sheviki i levye techeniia...*, op. cit.: 28.

146. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 102, l. 7. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to revive the Volga area party committee, first formed in 1918, which had subsequently disbanded. Representatives from Saratov, Astrakhan', Tsaritsyn, the Urals, Penza, Tambov, Simbirsk, Samara, and Kazan' took part in these deliberations. TsDNISO, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 13, l. 12.

147. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 87, l. 29; f. 200, op. 1, d. 90, l. 33.

148. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 83, ll. 2-3.

149. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 1, d. 110, ll. 1, 3.

Communists.<sup>150</sup> The chair of the Atkarsk RC committee remarked that owing to the strained relations with the Bolsheviks, the RCs had no choice but to merge. He hoped it would curb the arbitrariness of local officials and improve Soviet rule. Others justified their behavior by insisting they had no time to think of personal convictions when there was such a need to struggle with the world bourgeoisie.<sup>151</sup>

## Conclusion

Although Soviet power in Saratov province might have collapsed at several critical junctures had it not been for the Revolutionary Communists' support, the party is virtually unknown in the West and in Russia, where its role had been distorted. The opening of Russian archives makes it possible to restore the party to the historical record, to illuminate its relationship with the Bolshevik Party, and to study the reasons for the party's ultimate decline in 1920, a development that has great symbolic importance, for merger with the Bolsheviks foretold a bleak future for Russia's other socialist parties and for a multi-party system in general.

A political phenomenon of provincial Russia, the RCs emerged from the influential Left SR Party and, like their predecessors, they made their greatest contribution at the *uezd* level. Strongest in those districts with a history of peasant unrest and violence, the RCs drew on a radical populist tradition in the making since the turn of the century. In contrast, Bolshevism tended to be a transplanted political force in the majority of district towns, where there were few industrial workers. Formed by renegade Left SRs who rejected their Central Committee's attempt to undermine the controversial Brest-Litovsk Peace, the Revolutionary Communist Party drew its support from the district towns which, in contrast with Saratov, tended to favor signing the treaty in the spring of 1918. Soviet power was established in these towns and from there spread to the surrounding countryside owing to the popularity of the Left SRs and to the implementation of what in effect was the SR land program. Cooperation within the radical left bloc reached its high point in the first half of 1918 and the revolutionary solidarity expressed at this time undoubtedly helps explain the RC Party's sustained commitment to Soviet power, even when policies of the latter eroded the RCs' own popularity among the peasantry. Moreover, the Communist Party's tactical shifts in regard to the middle peasantry after the Eighth Party Congress, and its need to fortify its alliance with other radical groups as White forces moved against the Russian heartland, breathed a second wind into this radical alliance whose foundation had otherwise been shaken. The sources do not permit a confident assessment of the party's numerical strength, but they do document its broad influence.

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150. *Ibid.*, f. 151/95, op. 3, d. 13, l. 18; *Materialy k 9-i uezdnoi konferentsii* (Balashov, 1921): 6.

151. RTsKhIDNI, f. 282, op. 1, d. 47, ll. 23-23 ob; d. 23, ll. 1, 5, 6.

Indeed, based on this investigation of the Revolutionary Communists in Saratov province, it is hard to accept the assessment that the party was “little” and “exercised no political influence.”<sup>152</sup> To repeat, I argue that the party’s sustained commitment to Soviet power proved a decisive factor in keeping the province from falling to the Whites as a result of a rejection of Soviet power from within. Above all, this observation holds true for mid-1919, when Saratov came closest to shaking off Bolshevik power.<sup>153</sup> Although critical of specific Bolshevik policies, the RCs did not back away from their conviction that all other considerations had to be subordinated to the survival of Soviet power. This tactical stance held sway over most party members, making Bolshevik policies more or less acceptable, especially when their brunt was softened by local activists and rank-and-file party members, or conveniently ignored when necessary or when possible. Committed to social revolution and under the spell of vague images of a utopian future, RC leaders prided themselves in their party’s revolutionary pedigree and acceptance of revolutionary change.

The RCs did not cooperate with the Bolsheviks merely because they wanted to save their party from collapse, but because they believed that they ultimately could persuade the Bolsheviks to change their ways. As a result, the Revolutionary Communist Party fought to preserve and strengthen its influence over the peasantry—and thereby over the Communists. But the Bolshevik attitude toward the other socialist parties reflected the overall strength of Soviet power at any given time; the evidence adduced here reinforces Anweiler’s assertion that “in crises the loyalty or conditional support of these groups was valued, but when danger diminished, they were ignored.”<sup>154</sup> Thus, each partner brought an element of insincerity into the relationship, and this is especially true of the Communists. The Communists “used” the Revolutionary Communists, but it was not without some acquiescence on the part of the populists.

Why did the Revolutionary Communist Party ultimately merge with the Bolsheviks? As we have seen, populist critics had lashed out at the RC Party from the start. Moreover, the other off-shoot of the Left SRs — the Popular Communists — as early as November 1918 merged with the Communists; SR Maximalists did the same in April 1920. Defections to the Bolsheviks, as well as to the right, undermined the RCs too. In time, a rift formed between party leaders in Saratov and those at the district and village level who had to make a case to the disgruntled peasantry for unpopular policies. RC cadres in the villages frequently took the peasants’ side (“Soviet Power without Bolsheviks”), giving some credence to the Bolsheviks’ claim that the party included hostile elements, and less to Schapiro’s that by “refraining from any criticism of communist practices, the Revolutionary Communists purchased a period of free existence.”<sup>155</sup> They criticized

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152. L. Schapiro, *op. cit.*: 180, 181.

153. D. J. Raleigh, *art. cit.*: 340-346.

154. Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian workers, peasants, and soldiers councils, 1905-1921*, translated by Ruth Hein (New York, 1974): 231-232.

155. L. Schapiro, *op. cit.*: 181.



the Bolsheviks on many counts and as a result the relationship between the two parties had an inherent tension, the mirror image of which was the need each had for the other, especially when faced with military threat from White forces.

Let's return to the notion that societies not only predetermine how their subjects rebel against constraints but also co-opt strategies of dissent, according to its peculiar requirements. Ironically, and perhaps because the Bolshevik hold on power remained precarious throughout the Civil War, the process of co-optation between them and their populist ally remained a two-way street. In seeking to marginalize and repress this other revolutionary voice, the Bolsheviks found themselves locked in a dialogue with the very Revolutionary Communist discourse it sought to discredit. (In some respects it is paradoxical that the word co-optation assigns negative values, for the success it implies in persuading others is usually considered desirable.<sup>156</sup>) From the time of the RCs' crystallization from radical populism, the party saw its main purpose as the need to convince the Communists to broaden their narrow dictatorship of the proletariat to include all the toiling masses. The Bolsheviks' change of heart in regard to the middle peasants in March 1919 (co-optation of their opponents' criticism?) convinced the RCs that they were beginning to influence their Bolshevik comrades. Yet by the time the military confrontations associated with the Civil War drew to a close and the Bolshevik leadership faced the prospects of rebuilding a ravaged country, the Revolutionary Communists had even less cause to break with the Bolsheviks over measures the former found disagreeable and the latter claimed were necessitated by circumstances. The Bolsheviks had fared well in the discursive struggle among those who remained committed to Soviet power (and at times won over the support of the mainstream SRs and Mensheviks as well). This is especially true because some Revolutionary Communists from the start had accepted an important part of the Bolsheviks' version of the revolutionary tale that reified the proletariat, and now that the Whites had been defeated the Bolshevik version seemed even more compelling. Those Revolutionary Communists who had a hard time accepting this backed merger with other populist groups. For the rest of the party members, merger with the Communists merely exonerated their behavior since mid-summer 1918. In turn, the Bolsheviks absorbed more than individual Revolutionary Communist Party members in late 1920. Read Lenin's speech at the Tenth Party Congress justifying the introduction of the New Economic Policy and end of grain requisitioning: his attitude toward the peasantry bears an uncanny resemblance to the peasant Bolsheviks' notion of *vlast' trudiashchikhsia*.

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156. G. Graff, *art. cit.*: 17.